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8 November 1985

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Implications of a Snap Presidential Election
in the Philippines

1. We still cannot be sure that President Marcos's announced date of January 17th can be met or, for that matter, that a snap Presidential election will be held at all. As the Embassy reports, confusion reigns supreme in Manila regarding both constitutionality and mechanics. Debate in the National Assembly over these questions could be protracted and litigation endless. This, of course, may be precisely what Marcos has in mind. In any event the President has left himself plenty of room to move in a number of different directions including:

- o postponement to some later date;
- o synchronization with the local election scheduled for next May;
- o opting instead for a national referendum which would provide the appearance of a popular review of his leadership while avoiding opposition participation.

With this caveat in mind, we nonetheless believe that Marcos sees some obvious advantages in an early election and, on balance, expect he will move to nail down a new term of office no later than May of 1986.

Playing Washington

2. In our judgment Marcos has selected this strategy in large part to outflank his critics by creating the impression that he is accommodating Washington by seeking a new "mandate." We continue to believe that Marcos perceives a split in Washington between those who would like to see the post-Marcos era ushered in as soon as possible and those who continue to see Marcos as part of the solution and want to see him strengthened politically so as to make continued US support for his administration feasible and effective. By "submitting to US pressure" for a snap election, Marcos, in our opinion, hopes to perpetuate this fault line he believes to exist in Washington and further cloud the question of whether he is the problem or the solution. At a minimum, he probably calculates that he can firm up his support in the US Congress and gain further suspension of judgment in Washington.

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The Ver Factor

3. We believe that US warnings long ago convinced Marcos that he cannot afford to reinstate General Ver for an extended period or put off indefinitely his promised reorganization of the AFP command structure. This almost certainly also was a factor behind his decision to go for an early election. Marcos needs the present command structure in place, with Ver pulling the strings behind the curtain, in order to ensure a proper election outcome. This suggests to us that his most likely strategy will be to put off Ver's token return and the promised military reorganization until after the election.

The Health Factor: The Condition of both Marcos and the KBL Election Machine

4. Marcos appears to be enjoying a period of relative good health. In fact, his performance in dealing with Senator Laxalt's mission and the US media over the past several weeks amounts to his most impressive public performance since 1983. Marcos knows, however, that his health will continue to slowly deteriorate. He may have calculated that now is the time to face the rigors of a reelection campaign.

5. The health of his political machine could be an even more compelling factor. Marcos's electoral strength is centered in rural areas. This is where the KBL will find it easiest to deliver the vote without resorting to blatant rigging. But the KBL's strength here is a wasting asset. As recent Embassy commentary and analysis points out, growing Communist influence and the "implosion" of government (and KBL) presence in the countryside is preceding at a steady pace. Marcos almost certainly can extract more votes from rural areas now than would be the case in 1987. To the extent that he recognizes these ominous trend lines he will conclude that early elections are safer (quite frankly, at this point we simply do not know how realistic his view is).

Playing the Opposition

6. Marcos has been angered by Filipino, as well as, US criticism of his administration. He almost certainly wants to use the election to settle a personal grudge with those he believes have been trying to embarrass him with impeachment proceedings and exposes

He knows that the opposition will be extremely hard pressed to come up with the unity, organization and funding necessary to mount a credible showing on such short notice. He also probably calculates that at least some opposition elements will choose to boycott the elections thereby helping to prove his point that there is no credible leadership alternative.

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Potential Positive Aspects

7. Early elections should have a galvanizing effect forcing the opposition to unite.

o [redacted] the
opposition may be unifying behind a
Cory Aquino/Doy Laurel ticket.

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If opposition unity can be maintained, and if such a ticket can make a credible showing in the elections, the moderate opposition may be able to strengthen its position at the grass roots level. Its chances in the local elections scheduled for May could be improved and, in effect, it would remain on the board in better position to make another bid for power once Marcos leaves the scene.

8. Marcos's apparent decision to run with a Vice Presidential candidate is another plus. The existence of a Vice President could eliminate the chaos that is likely to follow Marcos's death or incapacitation, improve the chances for a legal succession, and hopefully provide for a more orderly transition to the kind of government we would eventually like to see in place in Manila.

And the Fundamental Negative

9. In our view, the potential positive benefits of an early election all lie at the margins. A snap Presidential election in the Philippines could well make it even more difficult to protect longer-term US interests there.

10. Marcos will do whatever is necessary to ensure a decisive victory--while striving to give the appearance of a fair election. We agree with Ambassador Bosworth that the chances of a fair election are slim. But whatever the degree of fairness, the air will be filled with charges of massive cheating. The ability to make credible, either at home or abroad, a claim of fair elections is simply beyond Marcos's grasp. [redacted]

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11. In short, this election, with its inevitable outcome, is likely to only add new fuel to the process of radicalization and polarization already well underway. Getting the primary imperative of reelection behind him, may lead Marcos to undertake some reform measures but fundamental change is another matter. We agree with Ambassador Bosworth that Marcos will remain unwilling to move against the fundamental vested interests of the Cojuangcos, Vers, and Imeldas of his world--the people who provide the underpinning for his regime and the people who, as Ambassador Bosworth puts it, are determined to "perpetuate Marcosism" even without Marcos.

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